

# Executive **EDGE**



## IMPROVING YOUR IMPROVEMENT

What in your organization most needs improving? Is it your delivery of services? Your computer systems? Your human resources procedures?

None of the above, suggests Douglas C. Engelbart, technology wizard and thinker, whose focus these days at his Bootstrap Institute in Fremont, CA, is on how groups can work together for better results. What organizations most need to improve, as Engelbart sees it, is their capability to improve their capability. They've got to "get better at getting better."

Engelbart, 71, has long been associat-

ed with computer breakthroughs. He invented the computer mouse, the idea of using multiple windows on computer screens, and groupware and hypertext. To Engelbart, computers' real worth is the way they can help people solve complex problems. And one of the most complex problems is how to maintain performance and continue to improve in the midst of changes.

Enter Engelbart's breakdown of company infrastructures and activities. Companies have two infrastructures: a "capability infrastructure"—buildings, equipment, procedures, and specialized

knowledge—which enables people to do their jobs; and an "improvement infrastructure"—activities that make the organization better.

"A," "B," and "C" activities serve the infrastructures. "A" activities, such as research and development and marketing, support the capability infrastructure. "B" activities, such as installing new system software or hiring consultants to streamline procedures, improve the "A" work and thus support the improvement infrastructure. "C" activities, in turn, improve the company's ability to do "B" work. Most groups, however, tend to neglect "C" activities.

"C" activities may include improving distribution of knowledge in the organization, getting better at evaluating the competitive climate, and increasing efficiency in running pilot programs and projects. Many companies already have technological systems to support "C" activities—databases and websites, for instance. But the human component has not kept up, and Engelbart urges cross-functional "improvement committees" to work on common problems. At Harley-Davidson, for example, the creation of intersecting brainstorming "circles" of top executives has accelerated the decision-making process.

*From Thomas A. Stewart, "Tools That Make Business Better and Better," Fortune, December 23, 1996, pp. 237-240.*

## THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

As jobs have become more demanding and job security has ebbed, finding personal meaning at work has grown in importance. Many companies are experimenting with ways to help employees realize their values and find meaning on the job.

Silicon Graphics Inc., a California computer maker, gives annual "spirit" awards to 50 employees who embody company ideals, such as "encouraging creativity" and "seeking solutions rather than blame." Web Industries, a manufacturer in Massachusetts, gives workers time off the assembly line to read books, and Lotus Development Corporation formed a "soul" committee in 1994 to study ways to improve employee morale. At a Dallas kitchen equipment wholesaler, employees complete annual "life purpose" statements instead of performance reviews, listing satisfying experiences and reflecting on these to set annual goals. A Minnesota furniture company sends employees on educational tours to other countries.

*From G. Pascal Zachary, "The New Search for Meaning in 'Meaningless' Work," Wall Street Journal, January 9, 1997, p. B1.*